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Mesenchymal stem cell transplantation for diffuse alveolar hemorrhage in SLE

Jun Liang, Fei Gu, Hong Wang, Bingzhu Hua, Yayi Hou, Songtao Shi, Liwei Lu and Lingyun Sun

Background. A 19-year-old girl was diagnosed with systemic lupus erythematosus, arthritis, malar rash, positive antinuclear antibody test and high levels of antibodies to double-stranded DNA. Two months after diagnosis, the patient presented with a sudden drop in blood hemoglobin level. Several days later, she developed bloody sputum, rapidly progressive dyspnea and hypoxemia. High-resolution CT showed diffuse alveolar infiltrates in both lung fields.

Investigations. Physical examination, complete blood count, erythrocyte sedimentation rate; urinalysis, 24-h urine protein excretion, fecal occult blood test, d-dimer test, acid hemolysis test, activated partial thromboplastin time and prothrombin time, direct and indirect Coombs tests, bone marrow smear, arterial blood gas, sputum smear and culture, and high-resolution CT scan of the chest.

Diagnosis. Diffuse alveolar hemorrhage associated with systemic lupus erythematosus.

Management. The patient did not respond to pulsed methylprednisolone therapy (two course of 500 mg per day for 3 days) and immunoglobulins (20 g per day for 5 days). The patient was referred to a specialist treatment center for allogenic transplantation using umbilical cord-derived mesenchymal stem cells. She underwent transplantation with an infusion of 8 × 10^7 mesenchymal stem cells. After showing dramatic improvements in her clinic conditions, oxygenation level, radiographic and hematological status, the patient was discharged from hospital approximately 1 month after undergoing transplantation.

The case
A previously healthy 19-year-old girl presented to a local hospital with a 2-week history of arthritis, headache and hair loss. Physical examination showed a normal temperature and normal oxygen saturation level of 98% when breathing room air, malar rash and mouth ulcers. Lung, heart and abdominal examinations were normal. Laboratory analysis revealed a normal white blood cell count and hemoglobin level (11.5 g/dl; normal range 11–15 g/dl), a low platelet count (50 × 10^11–15 g/dl), a low platelet count (50 × 10^9–10^11/l), normal serum creatine and serum albumin levels, a high erythrocyte sedimentation rate (ESR; 56 mm/h, normal range 0–20 mm/h), and low levels of complement C3 (0.32 g/l; normal range 0.8–1.6 g/l) and complement C4 (0.02 g/l, normal range 0.2–0.4 g/l). Urinalysis showed hematuria and proteinuria. The mean 24-h urine protein excretion was 349.3 mg (standard reference value <300 mg). In addition, the patient’s anti-nuclear antibody (ANA) was positive with high titer of 1:1,200 (homogeneous pattern), and the level of antibodies against double-stranded (ds) DNA was 564.6 IU/ml (standard reference value <50 IU/ml). On the basis of these findings a diagnosis of systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE) was made according to the American College of Rheumatology criteria, and therapy was initiated comprising intravenous methylprednisolone 40 mg per day and oral hydroxychloroquine 400 mg per day.

Approximately 6 weeks later, the patient was free of joint pain and headache, but presented with palatal mucosa and shortness of breath. A complete blood count showed a sudden drop in hemoglobin level from 11.5 g/dl to 5.7 g/dl, with a moderate increase in platelet count to 56 × 10^10/l. Fecal occult blood, d-dimer and acid hemolysis tests were negative. Activated partial thromboplastin time and prothrombin time were within normal limits, and direct and indirect Coombs tests were negative. A bone marrow smear showed marked hypercellularity. No evidence of active bleeding from the gastrointestinal, genitourinary or nasal areas was found. Two weeks later, methylprednisolone 160 mg per day was added to the treatment regimen for 4 days. On cessation of methylprednisolone, the patient’s platelet count increased to 66 × 10^9/l and the ESR was markedly reduced to 4 mm/h, but the hemoglobin level dropped further to 3.9 g/dl. The patient had a sudden onset of cough and bloody sputum. Auscultation revealed fine inspiratory crackles in both lung bases. A high-resolution CT (HRCT) scan of the chest revealed bilateral, diffuse, alveolar infiltrates (Figure 1a). A sputum smear and culture were both negative for bacteria, fungi and acid-fast bacilli. Blood and urine cultures were also

Competing interests
The authors declare no competing interests
CASE STUDY

Two weeks later, after the first course of treatment with pulsed methylprednisolone, a repeat HRCT scan of the chest shows progressive lung infiltrates. The second course of pulsed methylprednisolone 4 days later resulted in no improvements. The second course of UC-MSCT, with the same doses of prednisolone, continued to receive treatment with oral prednisolone 10 mg per day, oral ciclosporin 150 mg per day and intravenous cyclophosphamide 400 mg every other week.

Three months after being discharged, and despite combination therapy with prednisone, ciclosporin and cyclophosphamide, the patient was readmitted for dyspnea and hemoptysis. An HRCT scan again revealed diffuse bilateral pulmonary infiltrates. The patient received a second course of UC-MSCT, with the same doses of prednisolone and immunosuppressive agents. The treatment was well tolerated and the patient recovered. She was discharged with gradual tapering of dosages of prednisolone and immunosuppressive agents. No further relapse of DAH had occurred at 5-month follow-up, and the patient continued to receive treatment with oral prednisolone 10 mg per day, oral ciclosporin 75 mg per day and intravenous cyclophosphamide 400 mg every other week.

Diagnosis
DAH is an unusual but serious and often fatal complication of SLE, with an early mortality of at least 50%. Female
patients with an average age of 29 years are most commonly affected. The clinical presentation of DAH includes dyspnea, hemoptysis, hypoxemia and a sudden drop in hemoglobin level. HRCT often shows diffuse bilateral alveolar opacities. As described in this case, a diagnosis of DAH is usually made based on the presence of all these features and by the exclusion of other conditions such as antineutrophil cytoplasmic antibody (ANCA)-associated vasculitis, Goodpasture syndrome (also known as anti-glomerular basement membrane disease), thrombotic thrombocytopenic purpura and infection.

The etiopathogenesis of SLE-associated DAH is not fully understood, although contributory factors are thought to include immune complex-mediated injury, thrombocytopenia, vasculitis, congestive heart failure, renal failure and infection. The incidence of SLE-associated DAH is reported to range from 1.9% to 5.7%. DAH can occur at any stage during the course of SLE, and frequently presents with concurrent fever, arthritis, myositis, and peripheral neuropathy. Although scores on the SLE Disease Activity Index (SLEDAI) are raised in the presence of DAH, this has not been associated with increased mortality. The most common extrapulmonary manifestation of SLE-associated DAH is renal involvement, including clinical nephritis, nephritic syndrome or acute renal failure. In the present case, DAH developed when the symptoms of joint pain and headache treatment improved, and the signs and symptoms of DAH were the only manifestations of SLE. SLE disease activity, thrombocytopenia and renal failure were ruled out as possible major contributory factors for the development of DAH. We hypothesize that the patient had pulmonary capillaritis at the onset of SLE. The lesions present in the lung did not respond to treatment with high-dose intravenous methylprednisolone and, therefore, eventually developed into DAH.

Treatment

The therapeutic protocol for SLE-associated DAH is not well defined. Early treatment with high-dose intravenous corticosteroids is the mainstay of therapy, but this is not effective for every patient, including the patient described in this report. When the patient was referred for UC-MSCT, her condition was so critical that treatment with cyclophosphamide, which often exerts a slow and delayed effect, was inadequate. After offering guidance and counseling to both the patient and her family, an agreement was reached to initiate an infusion of mesenchymal stem cells (MSCs).

MSCs are multipotential nonhematopoietic progenitor cells capable of differentiating into multiple lineages of cells, including osteoblasts, chondrocytes, myoblasts, adipocytes and endothelial cells. These cells are able to escape alloantigen recognition because of their low immunogenicity. However, they can also inhibit immune responses both in vitro and in vivo. This inhibiting effect of MSCs is related to the functional modulation of dendritic cells, T cells and natural killer cells. The immunomodulatory properties of MSCs provide a rational basis for their application in the treatment of immune-mediated diseases such as graft-versus-host disease and autoimmune diseases. In a previous study, our group demonstrated the functional abnormality of bone-marrow-derived MSCs from patients with SLE and lupus-prone MRL/lpr mice. We hypothesized that SLE is therefore an MSC-mediated disease, which prompted us to further investigate the therapeutic effect of MSC transplantation (MSCT) in SLE.

In a mouse model of lupus, we found that MSCT was effective for inhibiting autoimmune disease, resulting in marked reductions of proteinuria and serum levels of creatinine and antibodies against ds-DNA, and increased levels of complement C3. Histopathological examination showed marked decreases in the degree of glomerular sclerosis and interstitial fibrosis in MSCT-treated mice compared with nontreated controls. Immunohistochemical studies further revealed lowered expression of complement C3 in renal tissue after transplantation compared with lupus-prone mice treated with cyclophosphamide and with untreated mice. Following the observed clinical benefits of MSCT in a mouse model of lupus, we tested the efficacy of MSCT in four patients with SLE refractory to cyclophosphamide therapy. All patients showed decreased SLEDAI scores and 24-h proteinuria, as well as improvements in serum levels of complement C3 compared with baseline. In addition, the percentage of regulatory T (Treg) cells increased followed MSCT. These short-term clinical data suggest that allogenic MSCT could be a safe and feasible salvage therapy in these patients.

In 2008, Zhao et al. suggested that MSC engraftment can attenuate lung injury in a bleomycin-induced mouse model, and that this effect was dependent on the ability of the cells to engraft in the lung and to differentiate into alveolar epithelial cells. In addition, Gupta et al. reported that treatment with MSCs in mice with experimental endotoxin-mediated acute lung injury provided a significant survival advantage compared with no treatment, possibly by reducing lung vascular permeability and the extent of pulmonary edema. The results of these studies encouraged our group to investigate whether administration of MSCs would have beneficial effects in patients with SLE and associated lung injury. UC-MSCT were chosen because these cells share most of the characteristics of bone marrow-derived MSCs but with the

### Box 1 | Preparation of UC-MSCs

UC-MSCs were obtained from Jiangsu Stem Cell Bank, Jiangsu, China, and prepared for transplantation as follows: UCs were obtained from local maternity hospitals after normal deliveries. After having been minced into 1–2 mm³ fragments, UCs were incubated with 0.075% collagenase type II for 30 min and then 0.125% trypsin for a further 30 min with gentle agitation at 37 °C. The obtained cells were plated at a density of 1 × 10⁹/cm² in noncoated T-25 or T-75 cell culture flasks. The UC growth medium consisted of Dulbecco’s modified Eagle’s medium with low glucose and 5% fetal bovine serum. After 3 days of culture, nonadherent cells were removed and the medium was changed twice-weekly thereafter. Once 60–80% confluence had been reached, adherent cells were replated at a density of 1–10⁹/cm² in UC growth medium for expansion. After two passages, cells were harvested that expressed CD106, CD105, CD44 and CD29, but not CD34 or CD45. The capacity of MSCs to differentiate along adipogenic and osteogenic lineages was also assayed.

Abbreviations: MSC, mesenchymal stem cell; UC, umbilical cord.
distinct advantages of higher proliferation, improved accessibility and lower risk of viral contamination.\textsuperscript{20,21} Box 1 provides further details on the preparation of UC-MSCs for infusion. In the present case, the patient showed considerable improvement 9 days after treatment with UC-MSCST. Considering that the patient had not responded to two cycles of high-dose steroids and showed rapid improvement after MSCST, we suggest that it was the MSCs, rather than the corticosteroids, that exerted a therapeutic effect.

The specific mechanisms by which MSCST might improve SLE-associated DAH are not known, and could be multifactorial. MSCs could, for example, act in an immunomodulatory capacity by producing soluble factors induced upon stimulation. An imbalance of cytokine homeostasis is a prominent feature of both experimental lupus and human SLE. Experimental data have shown that MSCs polarize the balance of type 1 and type 2 helper T cells (Th1 and Th2) via the secretion of cytokines such as interferon-\(\gamma\) and interleukin-4.\textsuperscript{16} Another mechanism of action of MSCs could be related to an effect on the immune balance between T\(_\text{REG}\) cells and Th17 cells. T\(_\text{REG}\) cells play a pivotal role in the maintenance of dominant self-tolerance, and the frequency and function of T\(_\text{REG}\) cells has been shown to be considerably deficient in patients with active SLE.\textsuperscript{17} By contrast, Th17 cells, which are inflammatory interleukin-17-producing cells, have been shown to augment inflammation and autoantibody production in the context of SLE.\textsuperscript{18} We found that MSCST can recover T\(_\text{REG}\) cells and downregulate Th17 cells.\textsuperscript{17} A third mechanism could be direct cell replacement by the differentiation of MSCs into alveolar epithelial cells in the lesion. A recent study showed that MSCs can differentiate into respiratory epithelial cells (that is, type II alveolar cells).\textsuperscript{24} To some extent, therefore, the differentiation of MSCs to endothelial cells might reconstruct the structure of the nephron, thereby improving renal function. Presently, however, no data can confirm or refute these hypotheses.

Conclusions
DAH is a rare complication of SLE that can occur at any time during the course of the disease. First-line treatment with high-dose corticosteroids has limited efficacy. In this Case Study, we show that MSCST was well tolerated by a patient with SLE-associated DAH, and resulted in disease remission. Considering that the disease continued to deteriorate despite two cycles of treatment with high-dose corticosteroids, that the patient showed rapid and marked improvement after MSCST, particularly after the second course of MSCST following a relapse of DAH, and that the doses of prednisolone and immunosuppressive agents used were unchanged throughout the intervention, we believe that it was the MSCST rather than the corticosteroid therapy that exerted a potent therapeutic effect. MSCST could, therefore, represent a promising future therapeutic strategy for treating DAH in patients with SLE.

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